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*Thesis/Project*

IN SEARCH OF KAREN THEOLOGY:  
RELEVANT CHRISTOLOGICAL AND SOTERIOLOGICAL INQUIRIES

BY

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## Abstract

The Christian Karens are the majority of Christian population in Burmese Christianity. For many decades, Christian Karens have represented the image of Burmese Christianity. Theologies of Christian Karens are considered as the theologies of Burmese Christians. The nineteenth century Christian theologies rooted in the western missionaries do not work in today's experience of the Burmese people, both Christians and non-Christians. Today the Burmese people are experiencing political, social and economic oppression because of unjust administration systems. Christian theologies should address these people's experiences in Burma.

This thesis will explore a possible way of liberation for the Karens who are longing for true peace and justice. I will mainly discuss the exploration of Karen liberation within Christian theologies especially in the doctrines of Christ and of salvation. In this exploration, I will try to present the current dominant doctrines or belief system and criticize them from the perspective of present suffering of the Karens, and then present possible doctrines or beliefs that will address the present situation of the Karens.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the midst of suffering, people hope for the action of divine deliverance. Christians believe that the gospel based on the life and actions of Jesus Christ connects this divine deliverance to those who suffer because of oppression. Liberation theologies developed from the twentieth century present the gospel in a new way in order to meaningfully address the needs of the poor and oppressed. Theology for the poor must express the authentic gospel in an appropriate way to fulfill the expectations of the people's liberation from their suffering. Believing in the power of theology, my task in doing this research is to construct an understanding of theology, which will address the present experience of the Karen ethnic people in Burma.

The history of the Karen ethnic people in Burma is a history of suffering. During the time of absolute monarchy under the Burmese, the Karens were captured and enslaved. During the time when Burma was a British colony, the Karens were dominated by the western colonial power that destroyed their identity and nationality. In the short time of liberal democracy, the Karens struggled for their identity and to be liberated from Burmese nationalism. In the five decades under military dictatorship, the Karens have suffered as victims of armed conflicts in their lands.

This thesis will explore a possible way of liberation for the Karens who are longing for true peace and justice. I will mainly discuss the exploration of Karen liberation within Christian theologies especially in the doctrines of Christ and of salvation. In this exploration, I will try to present the current dominant doctrines or belief

system and criticize them from the perspective of present suffering of the Karens, and then present possible doctrines or beliefs that will address the present situation of the Karens.

I will structure the relevant theologies for the Karens in three chapters. In chapter 1, I will explain who the Karens are and where they live; particularly I will present the history, culture, and the nature and suffering of the Karens. I will also discuss the connection of Christianity and the Karens by presenting the history of Christianity among Karens: the missionary theologies that dominate the present Christian Karens. In the later part of chapter 1, I will present new theological thinking that Christian Karens would need for the future in order to have a meaningful presence in both the entire Karen community and the whole Burmese society.

In chapter 2, I will discuss the need for transformation in the study of Christology for the Karens. Since traditional Christology cannot address the present situation, I will try to present a relevant Christology for the Karens so that they can see a meaningful message of life embedded in the Christian message.

In chapter 3, I will discuss relevant soteriological messages for the Karens. I will present some Christian solutions that will address the present suffering of the Karens especially under political, social, and religious oppression as well as facing the ecological crisis. Through this thesis, I hope the Karens will find a Christian message that will liberate them from their present crises in Burma.



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE KARENS**

In order to understand who the Karens are, it is important to clarify their social, cultural, and ethnic characteristics.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the history of Christianity among the Karens is also essential for constructing a new relevant theology. This chapter will present a brief history of the Karens by examining their cultural characteristics and social and religious life. I will discuss their suffering, review the history of Christianity among the Karens, and present contemporary theologies for the purpose of constructing a new critical theology.

#### **Origin of the Karens**

There are a number of different explanations of the origin of the Karens. According to Harry Ignatius Marshall, a scholar written about the Karens, “the Karens are assumed to be a group of Indo-Chinese tribes.”<sup>2</sup> The Karen National Union (KNU), the main organization fighting against the ruling government of Burma for justice, equality, and identity, states that “the Karens are historically descended from the same ancestors as the Mongolian people.”<sup>3</sup> According to Donald Mackenzie Smeaton, “the Karens are people from the borders of Tibet, who crossed the great Gobi desert into

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis I will use the term the term “the Karens” as noun and the word “Karen” as adjective to refer to the Karen people.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Ignatius Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1922), 1.

<sup>3</sup> The Karen National Union (KNU), “The Karen History,” accessed October 22, 2013, <http://www.rainbowends.org/karen/history.htm>.

China, and found their way by gradual descent into Burma.”<sup>4</sup> The Karens now live principally in the eastern part of Burma and the western mountain lands of Thailand. There are seven million Karens living in Burma and about half a million Thai-Karens whose ancestral villages are in Thailand. More than 140,000 Karen refugees have fled to Thailand to escape war and human rights abuses.<sup>5</sup> According to the Thai Burma Border Consortium in 2011, more than 50,000 Karens have been resettled in western countries as refugee communities due to political violence and instability in their lands in Burma, most going to America, with smaller numbers going to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and some European countries.<sup>6</sup> Among the Karens, there are many different dialects, languages, cultures, religious traditions, and social characteristics. The Karens are mainly divided into two groups: Sgaw Karens and Pwo Karens.<sup>7</sup>

The Karens believe that they are the descendants of *Htaw Meh Pa*, the mythical founder of the Karen race.<sup>8</sup> The Karens also believe that *Htaw Meh Pa* is a divine being who led the Karens through their entire history before the time the Karens entered Burma. The KNU assert that “The earliest Karens (or Yangs, as called by the Thais) settled in *Htee-mset Met Ywa*, a Land of Flowing Sand: a land bordering the source of the *Yang-Tse-Kiang* river in the Gobi Desert. From there, the Karens migrated southwards

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Mackenzie Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1920), 67.

<sup>5</sup> The Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation, *The Karen People: Culture, Faith and History*, 2010-2011, accessed October 22, 2013, [http://www.karen.org.au/docs/Karen\\_people\\_booklet.pdf](http://www.karen.org.au/docs/Karen_people_booklet.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Thai Burma Border Consortium, Programme Report: January – June 2011, accessed October 22, 2013, <http://tbbc.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

and gradually entered the land now known as Burma about 739 BC.”<sup>9</sup> The Karens are known as a people who are not naturally interested in trade and commerce or political affairs.<sup>10</sup> Generally, the Karens enjoy practicing a simple life; they normally engage in farming, live in mountain villages, and grow rice and vegetables as well as raise animals.

### **The Karens in the Burmese Community**

The Burman kings enslaved ethnic minorities throughout history.<sup>11</sup> Later the ethnic minorities moved to inhabit mountain lands where the kings’ army could not reach. Some historians believe that before Burma became a British colony, there were separate civil systems in Burma: the Burman Kingdom and the ethnic minorities’ peaceful lives in the mountains. Daniel Pederson writes, “Chinese historians believe two societal systems existed in Burma during the time of the Kings, which really only ended with the British occupation in 1886.”<sup>12</sup> In the time of the British colonization, ethnic minorities were educated by the Christian missions. Therefore, a number of educated persons arose from ethnic groups such that many ethnic people could be seen in government offices and the British army, and even in the court of justice. For the ethnic minorities, Christianity was the way of liberation to free them from suffering under the Burman majority.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Christianity was destructive of the former royal life of the Burman majority.

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<sup>9</sup> The Karen National Union (KNU), “A Karen History.”

<sup>10</sup> Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> Karen Human Rights Group and Claudio O. Delang, *Suffering in Silence: The Human Rights Nightmare of the Karen People of Burma* (Baco Rato, FL: Universal Publishers, 2000), 34-40.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Norman Harris, *The Star in the East: An account of American Baptist Missions to the Karen People of Burma* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1923), 36.

By the end of British colonization, many Christian ethnic educated persons had taken high posts in all occupations, including governing posts, since liberal democracy was immediately practiced. This created dissatisfaction among the Burman majority, especially for the Buddhist community that wanted to return to their previous condition as a royal race, as all the Buddhists belonged to the royal group – the Burman majority who had ruled as a royal nation before the British colony.<sup>14</sup> Burmans believe that Christianity separated other ethnic groups from the Burman domination. Based on the different political mentality between Burman and other ethnic minorities, the country has been ruled by the military dictatorship since 1968. The continuing conflict between Burman and ethnic minorities is sometimes seen as a hidden problem between Buddhism and Christianity.

It is difficult to talk about the politics of Burma's government in the time of military dictatorship because the military government not only oppresses ethnic minorities but also violates the rights of Burmese majority people. According to Anna May Say Pa, former Principal of Myanmar Institute of Theology, "Burma has had a violent past, in the post-Independence period, the Karen Insurrection had pit the Karen against the central government and that conflict together with conflict with other ethnic minorities still continues."<sup>15</sup> But in the time before the coup by the Burmese military, ethnic problems were considered the result of discrimination led by the majority people. Because of the attitude of discrimination, ethnic minorities tried to protect their rights and

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<sup>14</sup> Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 123.

<sup>15</sup> Anna May Say Pa, "Lament from the Land of Green Ghosts," unpublished paper, 1.

nationalities through the use of arms. Achieving autonomy was the first major objective for their revolutions. Instead of planning bilateral political discussion with ethnic minorities, General Ne Win's Burma army took control of the country and imposed a socialist administration by force in 1962. After 1988, the whole nation protested the administration of General Ne Win's socialist government; the military council ruled until the end of 2010. Since the country had been under the military government for six decades, the people became so poor that even having daily food regularly was impossible in some rural contexts. Therefore, the people absolutely need a just administration in order to liberate them from a life of suffering. The people also need personal and moral reformation to enable them to seek a better way of life.

The objective of armed protests of the ethnic minorities was changed to fighting for the oppressed population in the time of the oppressive military junta, so that Burma's population and the ethnic armed forces have formed alliance to oppose military rule. The former President of the KNU, the main ethnic armed force opposing the government, said: "We take every strong action against those involved. We are doing this (fighting the Burma government) to protect humanity."<sup>16</sup> Many university students from urban areas fled to the land controlled by ethnic armies for the sake of the ethnic revolution seeking democracy.

The regime's attitude toward ethnic minorities is described by Benedict Rogers, author of *A Land without Evil: Stopping the Genocide of Burma's Karen People*:

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<sup>16</sup> Benedict Rogers, *A Land without Evil: Stopping the Genocide of Burma's Karen People* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2004) 27.

The Karen land is a land torn apart by evil. It is a land ruled by a regime which took power by force, ignored the will of the people in an election, and survives by creating a climate of fear. It is a land terrorized by a military regime which to this day perpetrates a catalogue of crimes against humanity. It takes people for forced labor, uses villagers as human minesweepers, captures children and forces them to become soldiers, systematically rapes ethnic minority women, and burns down villages and crops. It is a regime which has killed thousands of people in the ethnic minority areas, particularly the Karen, Karenni, and Shan, and has slaughtered thousands of Burma students, over a million people are now displaced.<sup>17</sup>

Both the ethnic peoples' armed protest against the Burma government and the military junta's policy on ethnic people have created a humanitarian crisis in the land of ethnic minorities. It is clear that ethnic people need to be liberated from the life in battlefields.

### **Suffering of the Karens**

Even though the present armed conflict between the Karen National Liberation Army, the armed forces of the KNU, and the Burmese government troops is the main cause of the present suffering of the Karens, the Karens' experience of suffering has a long history. In 1992, the KNU stated the situation of the Karens before British colonization:

We, the Karen could not enjoy our peaceful lives for long. The Mon (one of the ethnic groups in Burma) were the next to enter this area (Burma), followed at their heels by the Burmese, both the Mon and the Burmese brought with them feudalism, which they practiced to the full. The Burmese won the feudal war, and they subdued and subjugated all other nationalities in the land. The Karen suffered untold miseries at the hands of their Burmese lords. Persecution, torture, killings, suppression, oppression and exploitation were the order of the day. To mention a few historical facts as evidence, we may refer to the Burmese subjugation of the Mon and the Arakanese, and especially their past atrocities against the Thais at Ayudhaya. These events stand as firm evidence of the cruelties of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

Burmese feudalism. So severe are these atrocities that those victimized continue to harbor a deep-seated resentment of the Burman even today.<sup>18</sup>

At the time of British colonization, unlike the other Burmese racial groups, the Karens especially the Christian Karens appreciated the British for their role in the educational development of the Karens. Because of the British government, not only the ethnic Karens but also other ethnic people of Burma received equal rights to education. Instead of living under the Burmese administration, the ethnic minorities preferred to live under British administration because they were provided education and equal rights along with the Burmese majority. Josef Silverstein states, “Christian Karens were favored by the British colonial authorities and were given opportunities not available to the Burmese ethnic majority, including military recruitment and seats in the legislature.”<sup>19</sup> There were two main reasons that the Karens were favored by British: (1) the Karens in the time of British colonization were easily converted into Christianity, (2) the Karens were sincere. The favorable treatment of the Karens became the main political and ideological tension between the Burmese majority and the Karen minorities. Although the Karens obtained special favor from the British administration, like other people in Burma, they were also economically, socially, and politically oppressed by the British.

As soon as Burma gained independence from Britain, the Karens were challenged by the Burmese nationalist extremists. The first Commander in Chief of the Burmese army was a Karen man, General Smith Dun. He was removed from office and imprisoned

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<sup>18</sup> The Karen National Union (KNU), “A Karen History.”

<sup>19</sup> Josef Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 16.

and replaced by the Burmese nationalist General Ne Win.<sup>20</sup> A few years later, the Karens began to protest against the Burmese nationalist government for the sake of their identity, nationality, and autonomy. Instead of political dialogue that had begun initially for the sake of national unity, the Burmese democratic government was replaced by the military dictatorship in 1962. This political change from Burmese nationalist democratic government to absolute military dictatorship created suffering not only for the Karens and other ethnic minorities, but also for the entire population of Burma, including Burmese majority civilians. What the Karen Human Rights Group says is true:

In the urban and central Burman areas, people are too afraid to make any move to oust the regime because of the massacres they know would result. In the ethnic nationality regions the opposition groups can no longer offer protection to the villagers, who cannot see any way to organize against the regime and see no option but to flee the government army whenever it is around.<sup>21</sup>

The current suffering of the Karens is mainly the result of the armed conflict between the Burmese government troops and the Karen National Liberation Army. Under this armed conflict, the following human rights abuses of the Karens can be documented. The greatest suffering that the Karens in the tribal lands experience is forced labor for the army. One of the most common and feared forms of forced labor is *portering*.<sup>22</sup> Porters are forced to carry more than forty kilogram loads of shells and rations through the hills; sometimes they are required to serve as a human shield to cover the government troops. Karen Human Rights group notes that, “Under normal government troops practice, the

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma-Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991), 50-51.

<sup>21</sup> Karen Human Rights Group and Delang, *Suffering in Silence*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> “Portering” involves both carrying rations and supplies to outlying army camps and carrying munitions.



villages assigned to do sentry duty along a length of road are held fully responsible for any resistance activity such as landmines or ambushes.”<sup>23</sup> In his *Revolution as Development*, Jack Fong writes: “according to Human Rights Watch/Asia that had been reporting on forced labor in Burma since 1990, none of the interviewers ever indicated that they were paid. Most laborers actually had to transport their own survival items such as food and tools.”<sup>24</sup> Not only men but also women are forced to serve as porters.

The Karens also suffer from looting. In wartime, a large portion of soldiers’ salaries and rations are stolen by their officers, because the officers try to make as much money as they can before being rotated out, and the troops have to loot villages for food to survive. Karen Human Rights Group states that “Villagers are forced to pay many kinds of cash fees once per month and often several times per month.”<sup>25</sup>

It is generally true that “village heads and elders are usually the first to be arrested, detained and tortured whenever their villagers fail to comply with demands. Villagers who are suspected of any contact with the oppositional ethnic troops or who fail to comply with demands for forced labor and extortion money are also regularly arrested, beaten and detained.”<sup>26</sup> According to their daily experience, the villagers simply believe that government troops are terrorists who make their lives miserable.

Rape and sexual abuses of Karen women are common. In wartime, men flee their villages as soon as the military approaches. However, women usually remain to take care of the house and the children. Without a male presence to protect the women, troops

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<sup>23</sup> Karen Human Rights Group and Delang, *Suffering in Silence*, 105.

<sup>24</sup> Jack Fong, *Revolution as Development: the Karen Self-Determination Struggle against Ethnocracy from 1949 to 2004* (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2008), 201.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Human Rights Group and Delang, *Suffering in Silence*, 98.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

more easily take advantage of the women's vulnerable position.<sup>27</sup> Jack Fong also cites the record of the Karen Women's Organization<sup>28</sup> that "rape is a systematic military strategy employed by the Tatmadaw (Burmese army) as a means to demoralize, intimidate, control, shame and ethnically cleanse Karen communities in Burma."<sup>29</sup>

Karen villages are displaced and relocated by the government troops as a means of controlling territory. Villages have been burned down. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled because to stay means death or capture for forced labor. Many Karens become Internally Displaced Persons (IDP). Life as IDPs is precarious in the extreme. According to Jack Fong,

The effects of forced relocations of Karen villages and its accompanying abuses of Karen villages mean that there is hardly enough social stability for the Karen to uphold and reproduce their way of life. Ordinary Karen can no longer sustain their economy because forced relocations prevent them from being near their fields or cultivating their foods.<sup>30</sup>

Benedict Rogers records that as a result of such forced relocations, "there is no place to find food and medicine in the jungle. They stay in the jungle and the children are crying because of hunger."<sup>31</sup>

In addition to living constantly under armed conflicts, the Karens are subject to other kinds of suffering because of economic and ecological reasons. Logging and mining projects in the Karen lands are considered ethnic cleansing projects intentionally

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>28</sup> The Karen Women's Organization was formed in 1949 and has a membership of over 49,000 women. KWO is a community-based organization of Karen women working in development and relief in the refugee camps on the Thai border and with Internally Displaced Persons and women inside Burma. Since our formation in 1949 we have expanded our focus from one of purely social welfare to try to encourage an awareness of Women's Rights and to promote women's participation in the community decision making and political processes.

<sup>29</sup> Fong, *Revolution as Development*, 207.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>31</sup> Rogers, *A Land without Evil*, 159.

planned by the military government. Current hydropower projects on the Karen rivers are also oppressive projects of the Burmese government targeting the ethnic minorities. A report of human rights abuses in Karen State (2002) describes: “Almost one-third of families in Karen State surveyed for a new report experienced human rights violations despite government promises that Burma is moving towards reform.”<sup>32</sup> In the face of this suffering and oppression of the Karens, a theology of liberation for the Karens requires a rediscovery of the history of Christianization and its theologies among the Karens.

### **The Karens and Christianity**

The most successful Christian mission in Burma is the mission among the Karens. Even though Adoniram Judson was a successful Christian missionary who translated the Bible into Burmese and who had originally planned to bring the gospel to the Burmese people, the Karen man Ko Thah Byu, who was converted by Judson, was the most successful Christian evangelist who converted many Karens to Christianity. It is essential to acknowledge Ko Tha Byu whenever we discuss the arrival of Christianity among the Karens. Before his baptism, Ko Thah Byu was a highway robber and bandit after his separation from his parents at the age of fifteen. He was captured and sold as a slave, eventually bought by Judson, and learned the gospel of Jesus Christ during that time.<sup>33</sup> The written record of Francis Mason says, “His baptism is recorded by Mr. Boardman

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<sup>32</sup> Charlie Campbell, Human Rights Abuses Rife in Karen State: Report, August 28, 2012, accessed October 26, 2013, <http://karenriverwatch.blogspot.com/2012/08/human-rights-abuses-rife-in-karen-state.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Norman Harris, *A Star in the East: An Account of American Baptist Missions to the Karens of Burma* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1920), 54.

who gave him baptism in his journal of May 16, 1828.”<sup>34</sup> Mason said about Ko Thah Pyu, “from the day of his baptism to his death, he never intermitted his labors in preaching Christ.”<sup>35</sup>

The Karens had some favorable conditions that encouraged their receiving the Christian mission. The first was their experience of suffering under Burmese oppression. The second was the tradition of believing in a Supreme God called *Ywa*. The third was the Karen myth about the scripture tradition called the Golden Book. Karens were waiting for the returning of a book of life or the Golden Book that had been lost. Ko Thah Pyu knew these conditions and traditions that allowed the Karens to receive the Christian message so his mission was successful.

Christianizing the Karens was considered a way of liberation for the Karens. The Karens believe that the Christian mission carried out by white people was a way to save them from the conditions of suffering. Francis Mason explains:

The Karens soon learned, that the foreigners were not vile like the Burmans; and they came to the city frequently, and the women with them. Formerly the women are afraid of the Burmans, and dared not come to the city; so they had never seen it. Besides, it was very pleasant to look at the foreign soldiers, standing in straight rows; and as they were quiet and civil, the Karens brought their wives and little ones to look at them. Then we remembered the words of the prophet, who said, ‘See, see, the white foreigners! The white foreigners! They stand gracefully, sit gracefully, eat gracefully, drink gracefully, sleep gracefully, dwell gracefully, go gracefully, return gracefully, speak gracefully, talk gracefully.’<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Francis Mason, *The Karen Apostle or Memoir of Ko Thah-Byu, The First Karen Convert, With Notices Concerning His Nation* (Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1843), 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

The history of Christianity entering into the Karens cannot be separated from the British colonization; thus Christianization and education provided by British colony were considered as processes of liberation by some Christian Karens.

The Karens' belief in *Ywa* was an interesting factor that helped the Karens to become ready to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ at the time of western Christianization among them. The Karens were accustomed to passing on their faith tradition by producing *Hta* (poems) and teaching them to their children. The *Ywa* tradition is culturally transmitted from generation to generation by using *Hta*. All *Hta* naturally consist of articulating about *Ywa* the Supreme One. Harry Ignatius Marshall translated and recorded a Karen *Hta*: "when first the earth was formed, it was *Ywa* who formed it. When first the world was fashioned, it was God who fashioned it."<sup>37</sup> The religious conception of the Karens' *Ywa* tradition, which declares *Ywa* as the creator, prepared the Karens to accept the Christian message about the eternal God of the Christian heritage.

The most interesting concept that prepared the Karens to accept Christianization from the westerners is the Karen myth about the Golden Book. Benedict Rogers writes about the Golden Book of the Karens:

For centuries, the Karens believed that they had once possessed a "Golden Book" which contained the truth about life. This book had been taken by a younger white brother across the seas. One day, the young white brother would return with the book.<sup>38</sup>

The Christian missionaries and especially Ko Thah Pyu used this traditional legend as a means of propagating the gospel among the Karens. Christian Karens believe that the

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<sup>37</sup> Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 212.

<sup>38</sup> Rogers, *A Land without Evil*, 41.

Karen Bible translated in 1853 by American Baptist missionary Francis Mason is the Golden Book that was given back by the younger white brother. Harry Ignatius Marshall says that:

it was accompanied by the prophecy of the return of the white brother with the Lost Book, which inspired the Karen with the hope of a better future and furnished an admirable foundation on which Christian teachers could build in promoting the development of the Karen nation which, during the last hundred years—the period not only of Christian missions but also of the British conquest and administration of Burma—has been truly remarkable.<sup>39</sup>

Not only the connection between the Karen myth about “the Lost Book” and the Christian Bible but also the similarity between some Karen myths and some stories in the Bible allowed the Karens to readily accept western Christianization. The Bible Society of Myanmar states: “some of the Karen’s traditional mythology that surrounded their animist beliefs made them more open to the gospel because, in some instances, it tied in with some of the stories found in the Bible.”<sup>40</sup> While the Karens embraced Christianity as a means of liberation, it did not always remain a liberating influence.

### **Current Theologies of Christian Karens**

Although Karens belong to different Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, Karen Baptist theologies are the main focus in this thesis for the construction of Karen theology. The Baptist in Burma possess a feature distinctive from other denominations in that the Baptist Christian organizations were founded by ethnically based religious organizations such as the Karen Baptist

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<sup>39</sup> Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 211.

<sup>40</sup> Bible Society of Myanmar News, accessed October 26, 2013, <http://www.myanmarbible.com/documents/152.html/>.

Convention. Therefore, significant Christian Karen theologies can be seen only in the Baptist tradition in Burma, since other denominations normally consist of multi-ethnic churches and organizations.

American Baptist traditions and theologies are the major theologies of the Karen Baptist Christians. Contemporary Baptist Christianity in Burma accepts most of the theologies from the Southern Baptist Convention of America, as well as evangelical and Pentecostal theologies. Christian Karen theologies consist of three main tenets: (1) a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible, (2) believing in no salvation outside the church, and (3) separation of church and state.

### ***Fundamentalist Understanding of the Bible***

Like American Baptist Christians, most Christian Karens believe “the Bible is the inspired word of God and the final authority in matters of faith.”<sup>41</sup> Most Christian Karens including their pastors strongly and simply believe that there is no error in the Bible. In addition, they believe that the Bible is the only Word of God and there is no God’s revelation outside the Bible. Western missionaries invented the Karen script when they translated the Karen Bible. The Karens need to learn the Karen Bible in order to learn Karen literature. Therefore, the Karen Bible is considered the source for spirituality and also for maintaining Karen identity.

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<sup>41</sup> Myanmar Baptist Convention, *Faiths and Orders of Baptist Churches* (Yangon, Myanmar: MBC Press, 2012), 16-17. The Karen Baptist Convention is one of the organizations under the Myanmar Baptist Convention, thus the major elements of Karen Baptist Christians are directly based on the faiths and orders of the Myanmar Baptist Convention.

### ***No Salvation outside the Church***

Christian Karens strongly believe that converting into Christianity is accepting salvation given by Jesus Christ. Christian Karens simply believe that members of Christian churches are the children of God, while members of other religions are not. It is usual in the Christian Karen community to describe a member of another religion as a child of Satan. The mission understood by Christian Karens is a process of total Christianization. Recently the Karen Baptist Convention stated the goal of its mission project is to have fifty percent of all Karens in Burma baptized. Karen Baptist leaders believe it is their responsibility to proclaim the message of salvation to their fellow Karens and baptize everyone to Christianize them.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Separation of Church and State***

Separation between church and state is also a dominant doctrine among Christian Karens.<sup>43</sup> This doctrine has provoked interesting conversations between the leaders of the military junta and the Baptist leaders in Burma. The junta praises this Christian doctrine whenever they give speeches in Christian gatherings, declaring that the church has no right to criticize military leaders since the world of politics and the world of the church are totally separate. Hong Kong theologian Lap Yan Kung states, “One of the characteristics of the Baptist tradition is the separation between politics and religion, and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 38-40. Baptist Christians in Burma do not cooperate with other denominations in its ministry.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 51-52. Even though Myanmar Baptist Convention states that “Separation of Church is only to prohibit the authority of the state to intervene beliefs and behaviors of the believers,” ordinary ministers easily accept that they can no longer say something to the corruption and injustice of the state.



it may become an excuse for the church in Burma to refrain from politics.”<sup>44</sup> Because of this doctrine, no official voice of Christian Karens has been heard throughout the suffering of the Karens.

In this chapter, I have given a brief introduction to the Karens and the context of their suffering as background for the construction of a relevant Karen theology. In the following chapters, I will discuss the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of salvation for the Karens for the purpose of constructing a new relevant theology.

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<sup>44</sup> Lap Yan Kung, “Love Your Enemies: A Theology for Aliens in Their Native Land: the Chin in Myanmar,” *Studies in World Christianity*, 15, no. 1 (2009): 93.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **IN SEARCH OF KAREN CHRISTOLOGY**

In this chapter, I will discuss the Christological inquiries that are essential for the Karens to encounter the message of Christ as grounded in their culture, traditions, and experiences. Gerald O'Collins writes that Christology is primarily a discussion of the nature and person of Jesus Christ as recorded in the canonical Gospels and the epistles of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> O'Collins' understanding of Christology is what most Christian Karens believe in their faith. But such a general assertion about Christology has little capacity to give an authentic meaning to the present situation of the Karens in poverty and suffering. This chapter will discuss the deeper meaning of Christology taking into consideration of the Karen contexts to offer more relevant Christological messages to the suffering Karens. I will discuss (1) dominant Christology of Christian Karens, (2) problems of present Karen Christology, and (3) features of a new Karen Christology.

#### **Dominant Christology of Christian Karens**

To understand the dominant Christology among Christian Karens, we must know the contexts of Christian Karens in Burma. The first context is the denominational setting. We can focus on two denominations, the Baptists and the Seventh Day Adventists, because the majority of Christian Karens belong to these two denominations. The Christology of Christian Karens is biblically based, because the foundational faith of

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-3.

the Baptists and the Seventh Day Adventists is fundamentalist.<sup>2</sup> According to the Myanmar Baptist Convention, Christological titles used in the church include (1) the Son of God (2) Savior of Humanity (3) Prophet (4) Everlasting Priest, and (5) Lord and King.<sup>3</sup> In defining Christology, there is no distinction between Christian Karens and Myanmar Baptist Convention. Biblical images of Christology have been the dominant images of Christian Karens ever since they were introduced by missionaries.

The second context is Karens' legacy of education and culture influenced by western Christianity. Christian Karens are known as religious conservatives. Since the Karens were educated by western Christians, they believed that they were liberated from their suffering and oppression by the power of Jesus Christ brought by the western Christian religion. Harry Ignatius Marshall notes, "twelve important centers for work among the Karens were established by the American Baptist Mission. The founding and conduct of churches and schools have been carried on in and from all of these centers."<sup>4</sup> Here, I would like to point out that the American Baptist Mission is the major influence that forms the life and faith system of Christian Karens. This Christian mission also shaped the Karens in accordance with the teachings of the Bible. Christian Karens think that if they believe in Jesus Christ brought by the missionary movement, they will also be given a quality western education. The nineteenth-century Christian mission among the Karens brought Christological images with strong biblical background, and also a culturally rigid religious conservatism upheld by these Christological principles. Even

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<sup>2</sup> Myanmar Baptist Convention, Department of Ministers, *Pastoral Manual: Faith and Order* (Yangon, Myanmar: Myanmar Baptist Convention, 2012), 22-23.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 300.

though many situations have changed throughout the last two centuries, Christian Karens have never changed or developed their nineteenth-century Christological principles that still constitute what they believe to be Christian orthodoxy.

The third context that shapes the present Christology of Christian Karens is the lack of academic education in theological studies. Since the majority of Christian Karens are members of conservative Christian denominations, the theological education they have received consists of simple biblical teachings. They never extend their Christological understanding from the canonical Bible to their daily experiences. Some strongly believe that Christian belief-systems developed apart from the canonical Bible are against the will of God. In this context, the Christology of Christian Karens is totally scripture-based evangelical Christology. Tyron L. Inbody, Professor of Theology at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, explains the meaning of evangelical Christology:

Belief in the sovereignty of God; the authority of the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, which serves as the sources for our knowledge of God and our guide for Christian living; the divinity of Christ, both as God incarnate and the Lord and savior of sinful humanity; belief in the efficacy of the life, death, and physical resurrection of Jesus, which was the substitutionary atonement for the salvation of the individual soul; salvation by grace through faith; and the personal return of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Christian Karens believe that to be an authentic Christian is to be a true evangelist. At this time they are trying to form a new and a strong relationship with Baptist organizations such as the Southern Baptist Convention.

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<sup>5</sup> Tyron L. Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 69-70.

## **Problems of Present Karen Christology**

There are several problems in Karen Christians' understanding of Christology. The first problem is the sole focus on canonical biblical Christology and on the proclamation of a traditional Christ. The Christological concept given by the nineteenth-century Christian mission does not address present conditions of the Karens who are poor and suffering. Today Christian Karens belong to the type of Christians described by Albert Nolan: "There are Christians who think that one can take Jesus seriously without taking too much notice of what is happening in the world around us."<sup>6</sup> In Christology, present Christian Karens discuss only the life and work of Jesus Christ in accordance with the canonical biblical documents. Christian Karens focus only on the proclamation about a mythical figure and they mostly neglect the significance of the historical Jesus. Inbody states, "the historical Jesus is decisive for the Christian because the historical Jesus also shapes the Christian life and praxis."<sup>7</sup> In neglecting the historical Jesus, the Christological concept of Christian Karens also fails to shape their lives according to a Christian praxis that can address the present experience of the Karens. I would like to say that this Christological concept of Christian Karens speaks only for a Christian tradition that is separated from human experiences.

The second problem in the present Christology of Christian Karens is the separation between the Christian doctrinal tradition and society. Today, people in Burma and especially the Karens are looking for the best solution under injustice, oppression,

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<sup>6</sup> Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), xvii.

<sup>7</sup> Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, 39.

discrimination, and exploitation. Christian Karens claim that they have the best solution for these kinds of problems, which is the way of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, the way they present Christology to the community results only in an imperialist Christology, which tries to Christianize the community. This way of offering Christology to society is very harmful even to the extent of creating religious conflicts that can destroy the peaceful culture of the Karen community. To meaningfully address today's experience of the Karens, the kind of Christology that will bring the best solution for human suffering must be a contextual theology. Stephen B. Bevans states, "Several important movements and currents of our times point out aspects in Christianity that make imperative a theology that takes seriously human experience, social location, particular cultures, and social change in those cultures."<sup>8</sup> The main problem here is the separation of human experience and the Christian tradition. Bevans suggests these two poles, human experience and the Christian tradition, must be read together dialectically.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, a Karen contextual Christology is essential in order to connect Karen experience and the Christian tradition. I would like to assert here that since the separation of human experience and Christian tradition results in a meaningless Christological message for the Karens, the main task for a renewal of Karen Christology is the connection of experience and tradition in the Christological message.

The third problem is the lack of recognition of the universal Christ in the Christology of Christian Karens. Since the Karens are composed of Buddhists, Christians, and Animists, a total identification between the particular biblical Jesus and the universal

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Christ destroys Karen unity. Today, one of the main challenges for the Karens is their lack of unity. Religious conservatism destroys the unity of the Karens. The KNU is the main armed movement that has challenged Burman nationalism and its military government since 1949. Ardeth Maung Tawngghmung, a Karen political researcher teaching at Lowell University, records that:

The most severe blow dealt to the KNU was the defection of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which resulted from the dissatisfaction of the organization's rank and file, who were primarily Buddhists, with the corruption, abuse, and religious discrimination of the Christian-dominated KNU leadership. The DKBA's defection led to the fall of the KNU's headquarters in 1995 and the consequential influx of KNU personnel from all sectors of the organization into refugee camps and eventually abroad.<sup>10</sup>

The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) is the Buddhist armed group that separated from the KNU, which is mainly led by fundamentalist Christians. In response to religious discrimination of the Christian-led KNU, DKBA chose to join with junta troops to defeat the KNU. I believe that this religious split occurred because the Christological concept of the Christian leadership of KNU was an exclusive one, which created religious discrimination against the Buddhist Karens.

I believe that a Christology focusing on the universal Christ can be one of the solutions for Karen unity. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen cites Raimundo Panikkar: "God always works in the world through Christ; where God is present, Christ and the Spirit are also present. This triune God works in all religions and forms the common foundation for all

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<sup>10</sup> Ardeth Maung Thawngghmung *The Karen Revolution in Burma: Diverse Voices, Uncertain Ends* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2008), 30.

religions.”<sup>11</sup> Panikkar clearly states that the concept of the universal Christ transcends conservative Christology focusing only on the particularity of Jesus. I assert that Panikkar’s Christological concept known as the universal Christ is essential to reconstruct Karen unity and to promote Karen national identity.

While the Karens are searching for freedom, the freedom of God’s Kingdom cannot be limited to a narrow understanding of Christianity. Taiwanese theologian C. S. Song explains the unlimited Kingdom of God and the essence of freedom:

So the reign of God is freedom. To bear witness to God’s reign is to bear witness to freedom. To say it is to say freedom. To believe in it is to believe in freedom. To practice it is to practice freedom. Freedom of course is not an abstract concept; it is closely related to a particular meaning of the space in which we live. I stressed that the reign of God should not be confused with a territorial claim often made by Christians.<sup>12</sup>

Christian Karens must review their exclusive Christological concepts in order to accept the value of the universal Christ for the sake of interreligious cooperation among the Karens.

The Karens urgently need a Christology that addresses their suffering, poor conditions, social discrimination, political and economic oppression, and the religious diversity. The new Karen Christology should be liberated from the limitations of fundamentalist Christian tradition. This Christology must be constructed from the experience of the Karens.

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<sup>11</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), quoted in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 270.

<sup>12</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 166.



## **Features of a New Karen Christology**

In order to address the present experiences of the Karens, it is essential to construct a Christology that addresses the condition of poverty of the Karens, addresses gender equality, emphasizes the universal Christ, and searches for new Christological images.

### ***Christ for the Poor***

The poor condition of the Karens underscores the need for a Christology for the poor. In his book, *Good News to the Poor: The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church*, Julio de Santa Ana discusses the biblical concepts of the poor, analyzes the existence of the poor in human history, and presents the liberation of the poor. According to de Santa Ana, “the meaning of Christ’s presence among the poor has a clear eschatological dimension.”<sup>13</sup> He does not mean that poverty is sanctified as a virtue, but rather that, while there are poor people, Jesus’ judgment is still to come. He continues, “We must be ready to accept his will which is not only for the last day since what we do or do not do today to recognize his presence among the poor is already something the Judge will take into account in his judgment.”<sup>14</sup> Since poverty is prevalent among the Karens, de Santa Ana’s discussion on the poor is a valuable resource from which to construct a relevant Karen Christology.

One of the ways to construct this new Christology is through the hermeneutical reconstruction of biblical messages about poverty. We can learn from the theological

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<sup>13</sup> Julio de Santa Ana, *Good News to the Poor: The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church*, trans. Helen Whittle (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 20.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

praxis of Latin American liberation theology. Gustavo Gutiérrez argues that poverty results from the fallen nature of human beings. He observes, “The prophets condemn every kind of abuse, every form of keeping the poor in poverty or of creating new poor people.”<sup>15</sup> He continues,

Poverty is an expression of a sin, that is, of a negation of love. It is therefore incompatible with the coming of the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of love and justice. Poverty is an evil, a scandalous condition, which in our times has taken on enormous proportions. To eliminate it is to bring closer the moment of seeing God face to face, in union with other men.<sup>16</sup>

We have learned from Gutiérrez that the poor living condition of the Karens is an expression of fallen nature of human society that is the consequence of injustice and oppression.

A way to address poverty among the Karens is to focus on land issues. The Karens are poor because their lands are occupied and exploited by unjust political and economic systems. The Karens are looking for the restoration of their lands that were occupied and taken from them by the government. The Karen Environmental and Social Action Network states:

Decades of war and increasing encroachment by plantations and mega-development projects have displaced hundreds of thousands of people from Karen areas. With the recent ceasefire and projected repatriation and resettlement of refugees and IDP’s the need to demarcate and restore people’s lands and communal use areas including community forests is clear, urgent and challenging.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 293.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 295-296.

<sup>17</sup> Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, “Land Documentation,” Kasan News, accessed December 17, 2013, <http://kesan.asia/index.php/research-advocacy-campaign/land>.

Karen Christological discourse needs to bring justice and to show the way to regain occupied properties in order to liberate the people from poverty.

Since the poverty of the Karens is the consequence of political and economic exploitation, I believe that a meaningful Christology for them lies in a practical response to injustice, oppression, and exploitation. Gutiérrez also applies the prophetic message in the Hebrew Bible in constructing his theology of liberation. He writes, “the rejection of the exploitation of some people by others is found in the very roots of the people of Israel. God is the only owner of the land given to his people.”<sup>18</sup> This is a strong message for the Karens while their lands and properties are being occupied and exploited by an unjust administration and unjust economic practices. Through the sixty-year dictatorship, Burmese natural resources have been exported to the neighboring countries for the sake of the dictatorship’s survival. More than two hundred mining projects and hydropower plants have been built through the cooperation of foreign firms. Most of the projects are being undertaken in the Karen lands. For these projects such as dams, mining, logging, and industrial zones, the government occupied lands, farms, and gardens from the villagers, which forced many people to relocate from their homelands. This situation destroyed the traditional careers of the villagers. The question that Christian Karens need to answer is how to solve the problem of the resulting poverty and dislocation of the Karens through a new Karen Christology which addresses this exploitation. According to Jack Nelson, “Christians must do the best we can to paint an accurate picture of Jesus set within the time period in which he lived and wrestle with the meaning of Jesus for our

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<sup>18</sup> Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 295.

faith.”<sup>19</sup> The image of Jesus that the Gospels project is a Jesus for the poor. Albert Nolan writes about the people whom Jesus lived for: “They are really poor who are dependent upon others and have no dependents are at the bottom of the social ladder. They have no prestige and no honor. They are hardly human. Their lives are meaningless.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Feminist Image of Christ***

A new Karen Christology needs to address the social situation of the Karens. Forced relocation and exploitation have made the Karens victims of human trafficking. Women sacrifice their bodies and lives for the survival of their families. I would like to discuss a feminist image of Christ for the Karens.

I want to focus on the Christological image of the suffering servant, which can be seen in the dedicated leadership of women both within their particular families and in society. I believe that authentic Christian leadership is not based on personal and educational skills that are given by nature. Rather, the Christian understanding of authentic leadership is based on the experience of suffering. Suffering for the sake of community is one of the marks of committed and dedicated leadership. Therefore, I would like to present the suffering that women experience to give a Christian understanding of servant-leadership.

In studying contemporary women’s life in Burma, Teresa O’Shannassy discovers that due to “the civil war and economic decline, most women’s lives are characterized by instability and extreme poverty. The current government violates the fundamental rights

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<sup>19</sup> Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Mission Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 329.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 29.

of all women and subjects man to gender-specific abuse.”<sup>21</sup> Through working for the

Women’s League for Burma, Christine Leah and Non Paw Gay discovered that:

Women, girls, and children have suffered disproportionately as civilians in this more than 60-year civil war. Soldiers bear the physical and psychological scars of armed combat, but innocent civilians suffer outside direct conflict, at any time; rape, sexual violence, abuse, torture, and forced labor are widespread regardless of whether there is a ceasefire or not. Women are therefore as much involved in conflict as men are, even if they do not bear arms and fight against the enemy.<sup>22</sup>

As a result of armed conflict, women and children are the majority of victims. The sacrificial suffering of Burmese women can be used as a lens to look at the life experience of women of ethnic minorities. However, in the midst of their suffering, women have encountered new understandings of Christ in order to find a way of liberation from their suffering.

One of the traditional rituals of the Karens is called “*Bgha*,”<sup>23</sup> Harry Ignatius Marshall says, “The grandmother or the eldest female in the direct line of the family presides as the high priestess at the *Bgha* feast of the whole family.”<sup>24</sup> For the Karens, a mother is not only considered as the caregiver and manager of foods but also believed to be the spiritual leader for a family. I believe that Karen mothers take care of not only the physical needs but also the spirituality of every family member. The position of spiritual leadership of women in the Karen *Bgha* feast can be used as one of the important resources of a new Karen Christology.

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<sup>21</sup> Teresa O’Shannassy, *Burma’s Excluded Majority: Women, Dictatorship and the Democracy Movement* (London, UK: CIIR, 2000), 14.

<sup>22</sup> Christine Leah and Non Paw Gay, “Karen Women’s Voices Vital in Peace Talks,” Karen News, May 26, 2013, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://karennews.org/2013/05/karen-womens-voices-vital-in-peace-talks.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Feast to the *Bgha* of the Karens is traditional religious ceremony dedicating to the Karens’ relationship with supranational beings privately practiced by each family of the Karens.

<sup>24</sup> Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 248.

### *Christ in Interfaith Dialogue*

One of the Christological problems of Christian Karens is the exclusive understanding of Jesus Christ. Most Christian Karens believe that they are the disciples of Jesus Christ and the adherents of other religions are outside the church of Christ. Some conservative Christian Karens believe they are the children of God and the others are the children of the devil. This is the main problem that destroys Karen unity and the ability to cooperate for peace and justice. In explaining the Cosmic Christ, Matthew Fox portrays the traditional Christian religion as old wineskin. He says, our current religious wineskin, which lacks the Cosmic Christ, is not only dangerously dried up but is also leaking badly. The Wine, the energy and power of the Good News, cannot be contained, much less allowed to develop and ferment in these old wineskins.<sup>25</sup>

The Karens need a relevant image of Christ that honors their religious diversity. Christianity represents only twenty percent of the total population of the Karens, while Buddhism remains the predominant religion. Before the introduction of the Christian missionaries in the 1800s, many Karens worshipped a form of animism. They believed that every living thing had a K'la, or spirit, and that there was a Lord reigning over every place, rivers, forests, or mountains.<sup>26</sup> In this context, the main Christological task for Christian Karens is the search for Karen unity through interreligious dialogue.

In addition, Christian Karens should advocate “the value of differences” as expressed by Paul F. Knitter. Knitter explains the values of religious differences by

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), 82.

<sup>26</sup> Amy Neiman, Eunice Soh and Parisa Sutan, “Karen Cultural Profile,” EthnoMed, July 1, 2008, accessed December 18, 2013, [www.ethnomed.org/culture/karen/karen-cultural-profile](http://www.ethnomed.org/culture/karen/karen-cultural-profile).

describing the acceptance model of a theology of religions. According to Knitter, “differences are not only something it can live with temporarily but something it wants to live with permanently.”<sup>27</sup> Jesus invites us to work against dominating systems here and now through dialogue and cooperation with others who are different from us. The emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ does not mean that Christ is the only truth to the exclusion of all other religions.

### ***Images of Christ from Karen Stories***

The Karens possess a rich tradition of storytelling that focuses on divinity and the connection with human beings. In telling these stories, the Karens pass along the tradition as a guide to good morals and ethics. Christological inquiry for the Karens should also include the retelling of traditional stories. I would like to discuss Christological inquiry from the perspective of two Karen stories about (1) *Taw Mai Pah*, the great leader, and (2) *Pee Bee Yaw*, the goddess of grain.

#### ***Taw Mai Pah (The Great Leader)***

According to the Karen Story about *Taw Mai Pah*, the Karens were living under the leadership of an old man called *Taw Mai Pah* who devoted his life to the welfare of his children and grandchildren. There were two significant things about this old man. First, he killed the huge boar that always threatened the peaceful living of the Karens by destroying vast lands of hillside cultivation, which provided food for the Karens. Second, this old man took the tusk of this boar to his home and made it into a comb. The wonderful thing is when he first used the comb he suddenly became young again.

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<sup>27</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 219.

Because of this comb, he never died, while his children and grandchildren passed away naturally. By living together with this old man, the Karens had security, peace, and joyful life. The Karens believe that this old man has left his children and grandchildren because of disobedience and disunity of the Karens. The Karens also believe that if they live a life of unity and obedience, this old man will return and offer peaceful and joyful lives to the Karens.

In this story we can see the Christological concepts of the Immanuel, God living among us, and the hope of humanity. Once, the Karens were living peacefully and perfectly because of the presence of divinity among them. The essence of Immanuel, “God with us,” is one of the Christological themes of Christians. Because of the love and concern of the *Taw Mai Pah*, the Karens were being protected from the dangers that might harm their lives. We can also see the essence of the eternal God in *Taw Mai Pah*. Whenever he uses the mystical comb, he becomes young again so that his presence can be understood as the eternal presence.

The other Christological image from *Taw Mai Pah* is the hope of humanity. *Taw Mai Pah* will return at the time the Karens love each other and cooperate with each other. Donald Mackenzine Smeaton writes: “Taw-Mai Pah still young with his magic comb, will one day assemble all his descendants and feast them with a boar, the rib-bones of which will be seven cubits long and the forefoot of which will be seven hands in circumference.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, 177.



*Pee Bee Yaw (The Goddess of Grain)*

Another Karen story about divinity is interesting for Christological inquiry because it describes a feminist form of divinity. Pee Bee Yaw is the Old Woman who lived with a Karen orphan and brought bountiful blessings to him. According to the stories, an old woman entered a village asking for refuge. All the villagers refused to give her a place to live except an orphan who gave her a place in his poor house. This orphan received several miracles from this old woman such as food and success in cultivating his paddy and other crops. Within a few years, the orphan became a wealthy person in this village due to his acceptance of this old woman in his house. After becoming a wealthy person, the orphan married a young and beautiful wife. “Unfortunately, he did not tell his bride the secret of Pee Bee Yaw’s help in raising so large a quantity of grain, but took the credit to himself.”<sup>29</sup> When his wife visited the field to look for her husband, she saw a woman who was blessing the fields of her husband. When she saw Pee Bee Yaw she was jealous, mistaking her to be her husband’s paramour. As Smeaton recounts the story, “she attacked her rival fiercely with a club, and beat her over the whole field, Pee Bee Yaw, vainly attempting to escape, jumped into a crevice and has never been seen since.”<sup>30</sup>

We can see a number of Christological features in this story. The first feature is that we can receive bountiful blessings from divine power if we are willing to accept it in our lives. An important concept of Christology for the Karens is to accept divine guidance in their lives. To accept divine guidance, we need to give our love and concern to those who need us. Pee Bee Yaw’s story teaches the Karens to prepare their lives to

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<sup>29</sup> Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

accept those who are hungry. By accepting the poor, divine presence will remain with the Karens to show them to lead a successful life. This story also teaches us to overcome our limitations regarding the gender of divinity. Pee Bee Yaw portrays the feminist image of divinity so that the new relevant Christology can be free from gender binaries. The Karens possess a wonderful Christological imagination in this story of a feminist identity of divinity. Both of these traditional Karen stories contain the Christological concept of relationship of divinity and humanity, and blessing from the imminent God. Both stories include human weaknesses such as disobedience, disunity, and jealousy that caused the split of divinity and humanity.

Since constructing a new belief system is a very challenging task for all fundamentalist Christians the new Christological inquiry that I present in this thesis is a challenging matter for my fellow Christian Karens. For me the best way to present this new belief system is to present it in my teaching ministry at the Karen Baptist Theological Seminary, the main theological educational center for Christian Karens. Through the Karen Baptist Theological Seminary, the Karen local churches can access this new theological thinking that can offer a relevant message for the present social, political, and economic situations of the Karens.

This new message can be mentioned in Sunday preaching in local churches especially the Karen churches located in urban areas or the churches formed by educated Christian Karens. Preaching is the best theological communication system for Christian Karens; preaching which focuses on the current situation will offer a challenging message to the Karen congregation to review their Christian life.

New Christological formulations in the Karen context are essential in order for the Karens to see the meaning of good news about divinity, humanity, and spirituality. The Christological inquiries that we have explored not only address the spiritual needs of the Karens, but also liberation from the conditions of poverty and an unjust political and economic system. This Christological inquiry will inspire Christian Karens to review their traditional Christology, which only focuses on the canonical biblical Jesus, and encourage the entire people to know the true relationship between divinity and humanity. In the next chapter, I will discuss soteriological themes from the experiences of Karens.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **IN SEARCH OF KAREN SOTERIOLOGY**

In this chapter, I would like to discuss a relevant soteriology which addresses the present life experience of the Karens. Since the traditional soteriology of Christian Karens only focuses on salvation of life after death, it is not a meaningful theological response to the oppression and suffering of contemporary Karen society. Because of the present social and political situation in Burma, I believe salvation is a process led by Christian Karens to build a decent society in that all people in Burma especially the Karens and their opponents the Burmans can live together joyfully and equally. Therefore, I will discuss a contextual Karen soteriology focusing on (1) national reconciliation, (2) re-visioning the church of Christian Karens, and (3) environmental justice.

#### **National Reconciliation**

A relevant soteriology for the Karens should address the political crisis of Burma and the need for reconciliation. To understand the political crisis of Burma, we need to know the racial conflict between the Burman majority and the ethnic minorities. I would like to assert that salvation for the Karens consists of overcoming the doubts and prejudice between the two communities: the Burmans and the Karens. Through the reconciliation between these two communities, salvation can come about for the Karens and for all other people in Burma. To discuss national reconciliation as an important

dimension of Karens' salvation, I will present the problems Karens face in Burma that require national reconciliation and a theology of reconciliation.

The political crisis of the Karens can be understood as a national identity crisis. In Burma, not only the Karens but also other ethnic minorities are considered second class. The Karens need salvation from their political crisis in attaining national identity. The dream of all ethnic minorities is to achieve true federal union in Burma. Through federal union, ethnic peoples believe that they can preserve their ethnic culture and national identity. David I. Steinberg records that "each ethnic group regards the protection of their individual languages, customs, cultures, and real or mythic histories as important to its identity."<sup>1</sup> Burmese national extremist leaders strongly reject the existence of ethnic minorities in Burma, which is the major cause that destroys peace and development of the country. They believe that Burmese unity can be built upon the destruction of the ethnic minorities. Therefore, the Karens are trying to protect their survival by embracing their ethnic identities. The Karens believe that "the Burmans were a warlike people, and they chased much of the Karen population from their fertile delta lands into the hills of eastern Burma."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the Karens always prepare to protect themselves from the harm of Burmans.

The Karens have looked for a way of attaining a peaceful life for a long time. The Karen revolution for self-determination has the distinction of being one of the world's longest-running struggles for freedom, having begun in 1949 and continuing to this very

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<sup>1</sup> David I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

moment. The important question for the Karens is whether their search for liberation and self-determination by armed force is relevant or not. One of the problems is the Karens' inability to distinguish between Burmese troops and Burmese civilians, who are also oppressed by the military government because the military government identifies itself as Burmese nationalist in the ethnic lands.

Actually, there was a history of cooperation between the Karens and the Burmese military in the important struggle for independence from British colonization. The Karens actively participated in the liberation of Burma. Mike Tucker records that during the Second World War, the Karens had joined with the Allied Forces of Burmese military to fight against the Japanese imperial army.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, there was a history of cooperation with other Burmese nationalities to struggle for independence from colonialism. On the other hand, under the British rule, the Karens were favored by the British authority and this was the main reason that the Karens became the enemy of the Burman people. Therefore, there were complexities in the history of the Karens' relationship with Burmans. I would like to point out that the political crisis of the Karens is fundamentally based on the Karens' dream of their ethnic identity and national identity. The Burmese extreme nationalism is the basic reason that has destroyed national unity such that the Karens had to choose to take up armed revolution. Regarding the Karens' struggle for liberation and identity, Jack Fong states, "The Karen do so by constructing an ideology, a nation, and administrative apparatuses that are in structural opposition to

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<sup>3</sup> Mike Tucker, *The Long Patrol: With Karen Guerrillas in Burma* (Bangkok, Thailand: Asia Books, 2003), 4.

Rangoon.”<sup>4</sup> This was the main reason that the Karens took up armed revolution led by the

KNU. Jack Fong also states:

Historical identification based on the construction of the Karen nation relies on the unfolding of past and current events, but with the added factor that these events are usually intensified by systemic crisis generated by Rangoon. That is, protracted crisis generates historical identification and solidifies it. Not only has the KNU succeeded in generating a coherent sense of nationhood among the diverse Karen nation during crisis, it should be remembered that ordinary Karen civilians dealing with and overcoming suffering and misery from the crisis have also emotively constructed a Karen nation.<sup>5</sup>

Jack Fong’s explanation of the political ideology of the Karen revolution points to the unsafe living situation among the Burmese. Karen leader Saw Ba Oo Gyi, the first Chairman of KNU, proposed four policies in the Karen revolution: (1) There shall be no surrender, (2) The recognition of the Karen State must be completed, (3) Karens shall retain their own arms, and (4) They shall decide their own political destiny.<sup>6</sup> This political policy needs to be critiqued in terms of a Christian understanding of true liberation or salvation for the Karens. For me, I question the ability of the political policy of the KNU to bring true liberation to the Karens. I have seen that instead of a peaceful society, armed revolution has brought about terrible situation in the Karen lands.

I would like to assert that reconciliation to bring about true peace is essential to overcome the conflict between the Burman majority and Karen minority. Christian Karens need to emphasize that soteriology includes a true message of reconciliation, which is necessary to achieve unity and national identity between the two groups of

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Fong, *Revolution as Development: The Karen Self-Determination Struggle against Ethnocracy 1949-2004* (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2008), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>6</sup> Rogers, *A Land without Evil*, 94

people in Burma. To bring an authentic soteriological message to the Karens, a reconciliation-building process for the Burman and the Karens is essential. The essence of liberation is a transformation process from a conflictual situation to a peaceful one. Valerie Batts writes “reconciliation is, at its core, a process of transformation for both sides in a conflict. The same transformation is also critical to an effective multicultural strategy of change.”<sup>7</sup> Not only the Karens and the Burmans, but also all other ethnic groups must commit to a process of reconciliation. Andre Schaap, a Research Fellow in Politics at the University of Melbourne, states, “reconciliation is initiated by the perpetrator’s acknowledgment of the wrongfulness of his act, followed by remorse and reparation, which opens the way for forgiveness and eventually, the restoration of community.”<sup>8</sup> According to Schaap, there are advantages for both sides in the process of reconciliation. Reconciliation is one of Christian missions, which needs to be emphasized in a world of diversity. To establish an authentic message of salvation, Christian Karens are called to be active participants in the present peace-talk process between the government and the ethnic groups, so that Burma can build a decent society in the time of its transition from military rule to a democratic society.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the literal meaning of the word “reconciliation” is “the act of causing two people or groups to become friendly again

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<sup>7</sup> Valerie Batts, “Is Reconciliation Possible?: Lessons from Combating Modern Racism,” in *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*, ed. Ian T. Douglas (New York: Church Publishing, 2002), 38.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Schaap, “The Time of Reconciliation and the Space of Politics,” in *Law and the Politics of Reconciliation*, ed. Scott Veitch (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 9.



after an argument or disagreement.”<sup>9</sup> Theology of reconciliation is essential for peace and justice not only for the Karens but also for the entire Burmese people. According to Brian Cooper, former Director of the Christian Action for East-West Reconciliation:

Reconciliation in Christ is therefore at the very core of the Christian faith and message. It was and is the work of God through Christ to reconcile the world, that is the whole globe system of human life, to himself – not, it should be noted, only the Church whether comprehended in terms of “individually saved” believers, or the Church corporate.<sup>10</sup>

Cooper is clear that all believers in Christ have the responsibility for the ministry of reconciliation for the peace of the world. In Burma, Christian Karens need to be reminded that the ministry of reconciliation is the essential ministry that we should engage in. It is a relevant way to do mission in the Burmese society since the mission of Jesus Christ consists of a ministry of reconciliation. Cooper strongly states that “it is abundantly clear that Christ’s whole life and ministry was one of reconciliation in action. He broke down the barriers in his society, and reached out in reconciliation and love to those on the margins of Jewish society, or right outside it.”<sup>11</sup> The theology of reconciliation is rooted in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, and Christian Karens must practice this ministry of reconciliation in order to demonstrate that they are true believers of Jesus Christ.

Theology of reconciliation involves renewal for both sides. The ministry of reconciliation cannot succeed through the effort of one side alone; both the Karens and

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<sup>9</sup> *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, s.v. “Reconciliation,” accessed February 15, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconciliation>.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Cooper, “Reconciliation Theology and East-West Relations,” in *Towards a Theology of Reconciliation: Papers Presented to the Sixth All-Christian Peace Assembly, Prague CSSR, July 2-9, 1985*, ed. David Ormrod (Prague, Czech Republic: British Regional Committee of the Christian Peace Conference, 1985), 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

the oppressive Burmese nationalists should faithfully work for true reconciliation for the national unity of Burma. As Valerie Batts says, reconciliation involves both sides in a conflict.<sup>12</sup> I would like to say that Christian Karens should bring the message of reconciliation for both the entire Karens and their opponents the Burmese nationalists, so that both sides can transform themselves to be a new humanity in setting up a new society in Burma. Through a reconciliation ministry brought by Christian Karens, I believe that the entire Karens will attain true justice and peace.

### **Re-visioning the Church of Christian Karens**

In this section, I would like to focus on a new understanding of the church. In searching for national identity, some Karen leaders believe that the church should be separated from secular affairs. I will discuss (1) the concept of religious bondage, (2) gender equality, and (3) liberating the church.

#### ***Concept of Religious Bondage***

In using Christian exclusivism to interpret the canonical Bible, Karen Christian leaders have discriminated against other progressive Christians and peoples of other faiths. Benedict Rogers describes the following situation:

Bo Mya converted to Christianity from Animism through his marriage in 1962 to Thra Mu Lah Po, a Seventh Day Adventist Karen, and under his leadership Christianity has been a dominant influence on the Karen struggle. In fact, Bo Mya enforced a draconian moral code with quasi- Old Testament penalties – people found guilty of adultery are imprisoned, alcohol is banned and the possession, consumption and dealing of drugs all carry the death penalty.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Valerie Batts, "Is Reconciliation Possible?" 38.

<sup>13</sup> Rogers, *A Land without Evil*, 105.

Religious bondage creates other forms of oppression among the Karens. The traditional Christian outlook is total religious exclusivism, as described by John Knox that “only one’s own form of religious experience is an authentic contact with the Transcendent, other forms being delusory: the naturalistic interpretation applies to those other forms, but not to ours.”<sup>14</sup> The intolerant attitude of Christians in Burma who would like to Christianize the whole population can cause religious conflicts in society. I believe that this attitude toward other faiths opposes the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

To liberate the Karens from religious bondage, we should learn the value of interfaith dialogue. Christian Karens have a responsibility to respect the value of others. There was a time when the Burma Socialist Political Party tried to isolate Burma from the international community. This policy brought poverty and resulted in the underdeveloped situation of Burma.<sup>15</sup> Just as the policy of the Burma Socialist Political Party, Christians in Burma would like to isolate themselves from the whole Burma community, since they believe that the other faith traditions are in opposition to the holy tradition of Christianity. Because of globalization a few theologians in Burma are trying to break the fence erected around Christianity as a means to build solidarity with others. It is only through dialogue with others that Christians can know the truth. Knitter states:

To know the truth we must be engaged in the practice of communication with others; that means really talking with and listening to people who are significantly different from us. If we’re talking just with ourselves or with our own kind, or if there are some people whom we simply exclude from the conversation and can’t imagine ourselves talking to, then we are

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<sup>14</sup> John Knox, “Religious Pluralism” in *Christian Approach to Other Faiths*, ed. Paul M. Hedges and Alan Race (London: SCM Press, 2009), 45.

<sup>15</sup> From 1962 to 1988, General Ne Win controlled Burma by using military force and tried to isolate the country from the international community, since the international community always condemned dictatorship of government.

possibly cutting ourselves off from the opportunity to learn something we haven't yet discovered.<sup>16</sup>

Christian Karens must prepare themselves to communicate with other religions, especially the Karens from other religions, so that they can gain a broader knowledge of the social, economic, and political situation of the country.

Christian Karens need to transform themselves in order to be a meaningful presence in society. Many Christian Karens assume that serving God is the priority of Christian ministry. They have a dualistic understanding of serving God and serving human beings. Therefore, some conflicts have occurred when the ministers try to participate in society because the people would like to see their religious leaders limit their activities to religious matters.

### ***Gender Equality in the Church***

Gender equality for the sake of cooperation of the sexes for ethnic liberation is also an important part of salvation. God's intention for church is to be God's partner for sustaining the whole creation. Karen women's leadership has saved the lives of the people and community and women have offered a different way of knowing. Brazilian feminist theologian Ivone Gebara says, "Opening up epistemology to gender and ecological issues brings in new frames of references for our knowing, broader ones than those established by patriarchal epistemology."<sup>17</sup> Especially in Burma, feminist consciousness has saved the whole society from the danger of masculine dictatorship.

Anna May Say Pa points out that in Karen creation stories "men and women are created

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<sup>16</sup> Knitter, *Theologies of Religions*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for living Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 52.

as equals for tilling the ground.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore she urges the social transformation for Burmese society especially through rereading the bible from the perspective of Burmese women:

Burmese women identify social and cultural customs and proverbs of their country that belittle women. They look at religious concepts and practices that make it very clear that women are the second sex. Burmese Christian women have read the Bible and interpreted it to challenge these cultural elements. While recognizing the fact that the Bible itself can be used to support oppressive cultural traditions and legitimate hierarchical structures, Burmese Christian women still read the Bible as the liberating word.<sup>19</sup>

For her, Christian faith should be transformed from an oppressive system to a liberating system for Burmese women, as well as Karen women. To understand the full meaning of the church, the patriarchal tradition needs to be transcended and our traditional knowledge system should be broken down. The patriarchal tradition of the church should be replaced for the sake of liberation for the ethnic people. If the patriarchal tradition can be transcended, possibilities of liberation will surely present themselves to the ethnic minorities, especially to the Karens of Burma.

### ***Liberating the Church***

With liberation from religious bondage, the church can be transformed into a dynamic force for the entire Karen community. A new church requires changes in structure of administration, modes of thinking, and practice of ministry. The church has to serve the world and involve in social movements and contribute to society. It is necessary to re-imagine the nature of the church so that the church in Burma can build up

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<sup>18</sup> Anna May Say Pa, “Wives, Warriors And Leaders: Burmese Christian Women's Cultural Reception Of The Bible,” *SBL Forum*, accessed February 15, 2014, <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=455/>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

solidarity with the people of Burma. Without re-visioning the church of Burma, the Burmese community cannot understand the true meaning of the gospel message that the church wants to bring to the community.

Since the majority of the Christian population in Burma belongs to the Baptist tradition, many people believe in the Baptist doctrine of separation of church and state. Consequently, the presence of the church in Burmese community has little meaning for the people, because of the church does not connect with the people's social, political, and economic suffering. Christian Smith explains the concept of disruptive religion and states, "Religious organizations can and often do act as movement midwives."<sup>20</sup> Smith asserts that religious organizations can help in "the birthing of movements."<sup>21</sup> I am empowered by Smith to believe that the church needs to play an important role in leading the fight against injustice. In sum, I would like to say that the salvation that the Karens need is a liberation process from religious exclusivism and religious bondage.

Educating people theologically is the most important task in reforming Christian Karens and a means of liberating them from religious bondage. Today, theological institutions in Burma are trying to reform Christianity so that the church can understand its mission for the community. As these new theological trends challenge traditional faith of the church, many conflicts between the local churches and theological institutions have occurred. Traditionally, all believers, especially conservative Christian Karens, want to see the country transformed into a Christian country. The theological institutions that

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<sup>20</sup> Christian Smith, *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social-Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 17.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 16.

offer new insights on Christianity have tried to challenge Christians' traditional concept of doing mission. As a result, the conflicts still continue among contemporary Christians in Burma.

Christian Karens need to reconsider the nature and function of the church for the Karens. They also need to reformulate a new understanding of sin and salvation for the people of the church. Presently, most of the Burmese people, including Christian Karens, believe that suffering and pain are the consequences of sin. The salvation that they seek is only for life after death. Because of this understanding, ethnic people are anxious whenever they see rich and educated persons because they feel that they are lowly because of their sin.

A new understanding of sin and salvation should be reconstructed in order to bring about liberation for Christian Karens. Accepting a humble status like Jesus Christ and trying to do justice is the beginning of liberation from sin and toward the way of salvation. As Gutiérrez says, "Liberation is first and foremost liberation from the radical slavery of sin."<sup>22</sup> He continues "sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of fellowship and love in relationships among person."<sup>23</sup> The church must reinterpret the meaning of sin in sight of ethnic liberation and establish true fellowship with each other, in addition to doing justice in the community.

### **Environmental Justice**

In Burma, environmental disaster is a prominent political and social crisis, especially in the time of transition from total dictatorship to a partially democratic

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<sup>22</sup> Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

society. During the six-decade dictatorship, Burmese has exported natural resources to neighboring countries for the sake of the dictatorship's survival. More than two hundred mining projects and hydropower plants have been developed with the cooperation of Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Thai, and Korean firms. Most of the projects have been planned in ethnic minorities' lands. This condition has destroyed the traditional careers of the villagers and forced them to relocate from their homelands.

Today, a few movements and organizations have actively participated in environmental justice movements because they know the dangers of dam and mining projects, which can destroy both natural environments and human beings. Burmese people from both ethnic minorities and Burman majority petition the new government to reconsider project agreements between the former military government and foreign business firms, especially concerning dam constructions. I would like to discuss the role of Christian Karens in environmental movements, since most of the projects are scheduled to be built in the lands of ethnic minorities. The dams are largely constructed on the rivers in ethnic minorities' areas, including the rivers in the Karen State. Christian Karens should be active participants in environmental justice movements. I believe that these movements should be led by Christians in Burma since the main victims of the dams are members of the churches. To encourage Christian Karens to participate in environmental movements, I will define soteriology as participation in God's saving work for God's creation and human beings, especially the ethnic peoples of Burma.

Since Christian ministry in Burma is understood as religious service, there is little room for social and humanitarian services. This understanding is influenced by the



Buddhist religious mentality of the separation of secular and religious spheres and the traditional dualist concept of Christian religiosity. Nevertheless, there are some responses from Burmese Christians to the environmental crises in Burma. Samuel Ngun Ling, current President of The Myanmar Institute of Theology, writes:

The basic Christian belief in Myanmar is that nature is the creation of God and that human beings are responsible stewards of creation. To preserve, protect, and develop nature and its resources, churches in Myanmar have taken vivid steps in many different ways (such as Holistic Leadership Training Institute of Myanmar Baptist Convention and Short Trainings Sustaining Environments). Other organizations such as the Myanmar YMCA, YWCA, Alyn Ein, Metta Foundation, Shalom Foundation have also engaged themselves every actively in environmental care and awareness activities in many different ways.<sup>24</sup>

Ling points to several examples that Christian churches in Burma have taken practical action to respond to the environmental crisis. The ministry of the church of Burma cannot be meaningful for the society unless it relates to the practical needs of society.

I would like to say that environmental issues are theological issues, because the sacred and the profane are not separated. Issues over dams and mining projects must also be considered as religious issues or theological issues. On the one hand, dams and mining projects destroy God's creation. Instead of liberating the populace, these projects will kill many people. On the other hand, these projects will only profit a small number of big transnational firms. I would argue that the church should not be considered simply as a religious organization but an important partner of the community in search for justice. Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan summarize Ivone Gebara's understanding of the Trinity: "On earth, trinity is shown in the interconnectedness of all life forms and the movement

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<sup>24</sup> Samuel Ngun Ling, "Environmental Challenge and Earth-Keeping Activities in Myanmar," *Theology and Cultures*, no.1 (June 2007): 161.

toward cosmic citizenship on earth, beyond the confines of national boundaries and particular locale.”<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the church should take the problems of the community seriously and involve in solving the problems which the community faces.

In this chapter, I have invited Christian Karens to evaluate their faith system regarding salvation so that they can address the present suffering of the Karens. Christian Karens should be a meaningful voice in bringing the message of salvation for political and national reconciliation so that the present suffering of the Karens may end. Christian Karens should reconsider their position as liberators to free the entire Karens from religious bondage, and to meaningfully participate in society. Christian Karens also need to actively participate in the environmental justice movement so that the mountains and rivers of the Karen lands can continue to provide for the Karens’ survival.

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<sup>25</sup> Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of Multitude* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 129.

## **EPILOGUE**

The socio-political situation of the Karens requires a new faith that can guide their lives in a relevant way. Even though the Karens are living in the twenty-first century, their theologies are theologies of the modern missionary movements of the nineteenth century. Since today's experiences of the Karens are different from those of the nineteenth century, their theology needs to be changed so that it would be relevant to present Karens. Through the study of the Karens and their need for liberation, we can understand that stability, peace, and justice are essential for the Karens. The history of the Karens points to the need for justice in living together with the majority people.

To provide a framework for a new theological understanding of Christian faith, I have discussed three areas for a renewal of theology for Christian Karens. First, as in other liberation theology, historical information about Karens and their suffering are essential for reconstructing new theological thinking. Through a critical scrutiny of the history of Christianity among the Karens and their theologies of mission, Christian Karens will come to see the need for renewal of their theology.

Second, the Karens should be liberated from Christological images that have been imported from western Christianity. Their traditional Christological message is only a copy of western Christianity, such that it has nothing to do with the present Karens' suffering because of political, social, and economic injustice. I have presented a Karen Christology drawing from liberation theologies, feminist theologies, as well as contextual

theologies. I have discovered some Karen myths which can be used in presenting a new Karen Christology.

Third, the Christian message of salvation should address the present experience of the Karens. I draw from liberation theologies to discuss salvation in terms of socio-political liberation. The Karens need salvation from their ecological crisis because saving the Karens environment, particularly protecting Karen rivers, is important for survival. They also need gender equality in order to bring salvation for the Karen women. Women need to have equal status as men in order to participate fully in fighting for Karen human dignity, national identity, and ethnic unity. Since the Karens have a long history of conflicts with their opponents, the Burmese nationalists, a message of reconciliation is one of the major soteriological messages that Christian Karens should bring for national unity, not only for the Karens but also for the whole society in Burma.

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